

The Man with a Story

BY SABINE W. WOOD

NEARLY every one has met the man with a story. His name is legion.

In his various cunning disguises he comes upon you unawares, on trains, in clubs, even at dinner-parties, and, fixing you firmly in his baleful gaze, proceeds to tell you his tale—that stereotyped and changeless story of the single adventure of his career.

He is always an egoist, and deathlessly a bore; but he can be detected, and, although discovery may not always win avoidance, yet you need not be fooled into giving him your attention. You may permit yourself the secret luxury of vicariously wandering far away into pleasant places, while the story-teller feasts himself upon your bodily presence and pours into your ears a chatter of impotence.

I may be forgiven if I speak with earnestness upon this matter, for a man in my line of business, and located as I am, is peculiarly open to such attacks. I should state that I am a salesman of sewing-machines, and that for ten years my route has been along the east coast of China, from Hong-Kong to Tientsin, with an occasional departure into the few interior cities which can be reached by rail. There is, perhaps, no part of the world more infested with male derelicts than this, and the single adventure is the hall-mark of the derelict.

I am always on the lookout for them. I pride myself on being able to bore beneath the most deceiving of exteriors, and to discover the story-teller within—and nearly always in time to avoid the visitation.

But now and then I fail, and am forced to listen to what should be the inmost secrets of decency; and almost as often I have to pay for the dubious entertainment in one way or another. And since this is piling Ossa upon Pelion, the best advice I

can give to those who suffer from the attentions of such persons is to follow my plan—whenever possible, get off with Pelion alone, by offering to grant the derelict his small favor before the tale is inflicted.

But sometimes a man's rules of life are impossible to follow, or at least inadvisable to apply; or, again, one may be mistaken. It was in this last way, I have always considered, that I became an unwitting party to a murder.

There was apparently no way of gaging Dr. Simpson as a man with a story. We came together so casually and so companionably that suspicion of him never entered my mind. There was nothing of the derelict about him. He was apparently a man of affairs at home, certainly a man of some means, and something of a traveler.

So when he came on board the *Woo-sung* at Hong-Kong, I did not try to avoid him, but rather the contrary. He was a man of about my own age, between forty-five and fifty, rather slight, alert, well-dressed, and interested—interested in everything he saw or heard or smelled.

As I made no effort to avoid him, we merely gravitated toward each other; and when he gave me his name, and told me that he was from Boston, he naturally removed all bars to acquaintance. I hail from Worcester myself.

We left Hong-Kong at six in the evening, and by ten the doctor and I had sufficiently accepted each other to drink our whisky and tan-san together before turning in. I awoke early, and was on deck before we dropped anchor at Swatow, for I had some business to do ashore. Simpson was up, too, and interested, as usual, in everything and everybody.

Three Englishmen were leaving the steamer, and out of common politeness I

asked Simpson to share my sampan—a favor of which he hastened to avail himself.

“Don’t mind me,” he said, when we had landed. “Go on about your business. I’ll walk around a little and look the place over.”

So I left him. The Woo-sung was not due to sail for four hours, which gave me time to call on the trade and get back to the ship before tiffin. The doctor was already there, waiting for me.

“Not many people traveling,” he commented, glancing up and down the deck.

“No,” I returned. “It’s the wrong time of year. Here come a couple of sampans, though. Chinese, first chop. They’ll have the best on board.”

Three cueless Swatow gentlemen, each attended by a serving boy, climbed the gangway, and another boat unloaded two of the Englishmen who had gone ashore and a new man who might also have been English. This was all—uninteresting enough to anybody but Dr. Simpson, who couldn’t be persuaded to come to tiffin until the anchor was got aboard and the Woo-sung had turned her stubby black nose out of the harbor and pointed it up the Formosa channel.

That afternoon I saw nothing of him at all. It was very hot, with the southwest monsoon following us, soft and sticky, and I hung about the deck doing nothing.

I am not an envious man, as a rule, and I have stuck to my job and played fair with my people without much thought of change; but somehow I had got to thinking about Worcester, and Boston Common, and the dining-room at Young’s, which Simpson had been mentioning, and I began to envy him. He didn’t have to travel up and down the China coast on the Woo-sung unless he wanted to. He could take the next boat from Shanghai, if he chose, and inside of a week he could be on his way to San Francisco and home. I couldn’t do that, and it made me restless. I wished Simpson would show himself, and we’d talk more about home.

The three Chinese alternately jabbered and dozed in the smoke-room. The two Englishmen were spread out in the only shady corner of the deck, too limp to move.

I tramped about, cursing a little now and then at the long, smoky stretch of coastline off to port.

Now this is no frame of mind for a lonely bachelor on the China coast to get into in hot weather, and when next I came to the smoke-room door I went in. I could talk to the Swatow gentlemen, if they were awake, and I might pick up something useful to me in a business way; but they were not awake.

In sheer self-defense I called to the bar-boy to bring me a drink; but just then my eye lighted on the man who came aboard with the Britishers. He was slouched down in a corner, evidently as lonely as I, and suffering as much.

“Make it two, boy,” I said, loud enough for him to hear.

He looked up and shook his head.

“Much obliged,” he said, “but I never do in hot weather.”

There was nothing cordial about him, though his tone was polite enough; and as soon as he had spoken he relapsed into his slouch in a way that told me he wanted none of my company. So I drank my drink alone and went out; but I had recognized him. His name was Parker, and he was accountant and secretary for the export trade of Ling Fu & Co., at Swatow. He was an American, too. I had heard of him and seen him, but we had never met.

They say out here that when an Englishman begins to leave off changing his clothes for dinner, it is a sign that he is on the down grade. I think that when an American takes a job under a Chinese, he has started to slide; and that was what I thought of Parker.

II

DINNER-TIME came, and Dr. Simpson, thank the Lord, appeared in a fresh white suit, clean and cool. The best I could do was to change my collar.

The sun was dropping over the land as we went on deck again, and the following breeze, loaded with moisture, settled the smoke from the ship’s funnel over her decks in a stifling, cindery cloud, so that we gave it up for the smoke-room.

The Chinese were already there, and so

was Parker, slouched in a chair. The Englishmen came in, too, and dropped into a corner. Simpson offered me a smoke, and we sat down on a settee where the fan could reach us. Simpson smoked a while in silence, gnawing at the end of his cheroot in a way that I felt meant conversation. And I was not mistaken.

"Don't you find," he began presently, "that the life out here is a trifle enervating? I don't mean physically so much as mentally. I've been traveling now for nearly six months, and I've been knocking about along the coast all the way from Calcutta, not forgetting Java and the Straits, and I've observed that Americans and Europeans haven't the push and energy they have at home, Americans especially. How do you find it yourself?"

"Well," I said, "I suppose that is true enough. At home the atmosphere is different. Everybody hustles. Here nobody does, and a lone American here and there can't exactly change the habits of China, you know."

"So you change your own habits!"

"I expect we do, to some extent," I returned, wondering what he was driving at.

"I believe," he asserted, flinging away the end of his cheroot and preparing to light another, "that is the real 'call of the East' we hear so much about. It is the lazy life, and its permanent effect on a man's character. I will venture to say that of those who have lived ten years in this part of the world, not one in ten can ever go back home and become a real, live American again. And he is lucky if he doesn't go to pieces altogether, and end as a sort of a derelict, like a lot I've met."

Simpson's voice was a deep, rich barytone, and he did not try to moderate it. I saw the two Englishmen stare their disapproval. They were not Englishmen of the sort you generally find in books—wild younger sons, or the scions of wealthy houses. If ever in their lives at home they had dressed for dinner, they looked as if they had begun to drop the habit; and they plainly did not like Simpson's theories.

As Simpson struck a light, my eyes fell also on Parker, slumped in his chair with his back toward us. Even he, as inert a

man as I had seen on the coast, shifted uneasily, as if he had heard an unpleasant truth put into words by an unsympathetic tongue.

"I suppose there are a good many who never intend to go back," Simpson began again; "men who have come out here to get away from something, to bury themselves."

"Yes," I agreed, for I had known more than one like that. "Only it is their friends who generally have to do the burying."

"Exactly!" boomed Simpson. "I once knew of a man who is believed to have come out here. I did not know him personally, you understand. I never laid eyes on him, for the matter of that, but his story is rather tragic."

I was in for it. Nothing could rescue me now.

"He was not the sort of man, from what I can learn, whom you would expect to turn out that way," Simpson went on in a reflective tone. "He was about thirty when he left Boston, and that was five years ago, or a little more. He was a married man, too, and he had an excellent position in a big leather house, with every prospect of a good future; yet he dropped out one day—dropped out absolutely. Except for one indirect report from Shanghai that he had been seen somewhere out here, not a word has come from him for five years."

"To begin with, he was an only son of very well-to-do people, and that, of course, nine times out of ten, is tantamount to saying that he was a spoiled boy. At any rate, he was the kind that must always have its own way or go into the sulks. His father sent him to college; but he was allowed to choose most of his own courses, and he picked the easiest ones, which were those of the least probable use to him in any line of work he might follow. The result was that he had a glorious college career, and came out as poorly equipped as a young man can well be to start the serious affairs of life."

"But he was hardly to be blamed for that. His mother was dead, and his father, who was not a college man, assumed that a college education was a college education, and that that was all there was to be said

of it; that it fitted a young man to assume at once a position of responsibility — any position in which brains are supposed to count. He did not know that brains are not made in colleges, and that character is the thing that counts in life; nor did he in the least realize that the lad's bringing up was against his ever having any character at all.

"The father decided that his son should become a banker; so when the boy had scraped together enough superficial acquirements to make it impossible for the college to refuse him a degree, he was forthwith launched — after his usual summer vacation — in a Boston financial house, where he got four dollars a week, lived at home, and had all the bills that his allowance wouldn't pay settled by his father. No responsibility for the boy, you see; no chance at all to find out what self-respect is like, or to learn the value of a dollar."

III

SIMPSON paused as if in the regular order of narration he had come to the end of a chapter. I was not particularly interested in the story of the boy, but there was something in the way it was told that held my attention. I kept wondering, for one thing, where Simpson came in. He had said that the boy was not even an acquaintance, and yet he was going into his character, or lack of character, with a thoroughness that showed some pretty close study.

It was a story that he must have told often, too, for there was a certain glibness in his style that could hardly have come without practise. He was like an actor who has spoken his part for a hundred odd nights, and has become letter-perfect. There was stage business, too—slight gestures of the head and hand, raisings and lowerings of the eyebrows. Even the cheroot seemed to go out as if trained to do so, in order that another might be chosen and lighted at some effective moment.

Simpson was lighting one now.

"So," he said, licking down a loose corner, "when the boy got married" — he placed the cheroot between his wide, square-ended teeth — "to a stenographer in the

bank" — he struck a match under the chair-arm — "there was the devil to pay. The boy's father had no great objection to his marrying; in fact, he had been looking about in the exclusive precincts of the Back Bay with an eye to just such a development; but here the boy had chosen for himself, and a stenographer!

"And what did he do? Why, the natural thing, of course. Instead of recognizing that his son had done exactly what might have been expected, as the young man had never learned self-control and responsibility, the father turned on him, cursed him for disgracing the family name, and kicked him out.

"It was the most brutal kind of injustice, of course. A man's brutality to some one who has trusted him, or has been his dependent, is always a thousand times greater than it could possibly be to any one else.

"With the first real spark of manhood he had ever been called upon to show, the boy defied his father and went off with his wife. He had a little money—a couple of thousand dollars—left him by his mother; and on the strength of this he took the girl away from her work and set her up in an apartment somewhere, with a light house-keeping kit, and with nothing to do but mend his socks and wait for him to come home at dinner-time.

"This went on for about six months, and then the father died suddenly of heart-disease. When his affairs were settled, after the funeral, it was found that his debts were his chief possessions, and that there was nothing for the boy but ten thousand dollars or so from a life-insurance.

"Now a young man who goes into a banking-house in these days must have certain qualifications. They may be of two kinds — either capital and influence, or brains. The boy I am telling about had neither. He had nothing but a set of society mannerisms and a taste for luxury. This being so, there is really no need to tell in detail what happened. You have already guessed it. He saw the other fellows go above him while he stood still. He lived meanwhile according to his traditions, and on his principal. When he saw that diminish, he speculated in stocks, won, lost, kept

losing, was discovered by the firm and dropped at the end of the month. There was no suspicion of dishonesty against him. It was simply the rule against stock-gambling that he had disobeyed. On principle he could no longer be trusted.

"But his wife was a good girl. She had never been led to believe that work was not intended for human beings, so she stopped sitting in the flat and waiting for him to come home to tell her that he was still hunting for a job, and went back to her typewriter in the first office that would take her."

The doctor paused again, and a peculiar, sudden sense of an audience made me look across the smoke-room. I had not noticed before that any one was interested, or even listening. Now I saw that they were all waiting for Simpson to go on.

The two Englishmen opposite were no longer lounging, but were sitting in attitudes of attention and gazing across at us. Even the three Chinese gentlemen from Swatow had ceased their guttural exchanges and were regarding the teller of the tale, although I doubt if they understood a single word.

But Simpson seemed unconscious of the listeners, and went on as before, with his round barytone unmoderated, talking straight at the bulkhead opposite, over the top of Parker's chair, into which the occupant had slumped until the back of his skull was just visible.

"Yes," said Simpson, with a deliberate reflectiveness in his tone, "that girl was a good girl. You see, I knew her—afterward. It was she who finally got him into a leather house, where he did fairly well, was advanced, and was making good—that is, as good as a man of his type can ever make anywhere.

"But he was never, it seemed, reconciled to what the future apparently held out for him. It was his legacy of self-esteem, I suppose—the sort of handicap that so many men carry through life, a burden that makes them unwilling to take their proper station in the world and to do the things they are qualified for. How many men do you know who are dissatisfied, out of place, because they deem themselves too mighty for small-

er things? They are like swimmers who try to keep from getting their heads wet.

"With the girl it was different. She had no false pride at all, and was perfectly willing to remain at one level until she had found the means to a higher one. She was not ashamed of being somebody's stenographer. So, in course of time, she rose to the position of confidential secretary at a good salary.

"It is easy enough to guess how matters stood in that household. The wife was the chief breadwinner, and although she never let her husband know it by any word or act, no matter what the provocation, he must have suspected that she used more money than she accounted for; and that was a fatal suspicion."

Simpson paused again, and the silence of the room instantly became charged with the tenseness of—waiting. I do not know just the word for it. I could not rouse in myself the interest in this story that the others seemed to display. They had sensed something that I could not grasp.

Simpson went on:

"But his surmises as to the money she spent for this and that were never voiced. Possibly they never reached the dignity of a suspicion until something happened which, to his mind, made them proof. It was one night as he was coming home. He had climbed the stairs, and, just before reaching his floor, he passed a man coming down. Turning onto his own landing, he was just in time to see his wife going in at their entryway. It was quite evident to him that she had walked to the stairs with the stranger, as in fact she had.

"Such terrible mistakes are made in little things! The very tone of a voice can upset a career—has done it, I suppose, many times. Just the wrong inflection in asking a question may arouse a stubborn sense of insult that refuses explanation and creates a breach between two persons—a breach that can never be closed, because the raw surfaces are out of touch and infected by the poison of misbelief. If he had asked who this man was in a voice that had not plainly indicated distrust in her, nothing would have happened. As it was, hurt and insulted, she kept silence.

"The fact was that some relative had died and left her a sum of money. The man on the stairs was the relative's executor, who had called in connection with the bequest. She had instantly decided to spend the money—a few hundred dollars—upon a little trip somewhere, a vacation for both of them. He was not to know until her plans were complete. It was to be a surprise. A good girl, you see!

"The psychologists who pretend to analyze and catalogue our emotions," went on Simpson, after another of his slightly dramatic pauses, "are clever, but they are not yet very useful. If they were, they would practise their profession as a physician does, and when two hearts become sick, they would come forward with the proper remedy. Love and jealousy are the components of hatred or despair, according to the proportions of the mixture.

"The man I have been telling about loved the woman. There can be no doubt of that; but outside conditions, circumstances that he never had the power to modify, much less to control, had engulfed him. Ever since he had left college, the world, his world, had been gradually but surely pushing him out into space beyond its orbit. His college friends had been going on without him. He had seen the social position that he considered his birth-right gradually recede until it was almost beyond his reach. The men with whom he had started, apparently no better equipped than himself, but favored by a smiling fortune, had outstripped him. He could not understand it.

"And now there had come to prey upon him the thought that his wife, who was so far below him in his own father's estimation that she could never be accepted, was joining the others, and was leaving him deserted and outcast, even from her heart.

"As the days went by, they preserved the outward conventions of companionship, but only the form was there. The soul of it was gone. If it was bad for him, it was worse for her, for there had happened one of those accidents of fate that make one turn unbeliever overnight. The delight with which she would have greeted it a month before was now turned to fear and

wretchedness by the cruelty of his dumb suspicion. There were days of suffering, when, physically unfit, she forced herself to her work through sheer terror of what discovery might mean. To become the mother of *his* child, *under suspicion!*

"Heaven only knows what she went through in those days. Then came the end. One morning she had gone to the executor of her relative to sign some papers, and had been taken ill in his office. Calling a taxicab, he had offered to see her home. After they had started, she was so much better that he had asked permission to drive to the South Station for a grip that he had left there. On the way the jolting of the cab on the cobbles affected her badly, and she turned so white that the man became alarmed, and drew her to him with his arm, to encourage and steady her. And it was just at that moment that her husband saw them, driving toward the station.

"To a man of his make-up and stamina it was, of course, like a detonator to a charge of guncotton. He simply exploded and disappeared as completely as if he had been blown to atoms, then and there. He had been so close to the cab that she had seen the look in his eyes. If she had not been so ill she would have made the driver stop; but it was so sudden, so unexpected, that before she could cry out her pride had stepped in and bidden her to keep silence in the presence of a stranger."

IV

As Simpson in his deliberate, chapter-ending fashion ceased speaking, something made me turn and look at him. I do not know what it was—one of those queer, subconscious pulls upon the attention, I suppose, such as cause you to turn in the street after passing some one, without in the least knowing why.

His voice had been calm, steady, and if anything, rather flat; but his face, when I saw it, brought to me the realization that he himself must have some very vital interest in the people about whom he had been telling. He was white, like a candle, and his eyes burned and glittered like living light in a death's-head. He was sweating, too. Drops glistened on his forehead.

He did not seem aware of my scrutiny, or even of my presence, but sat there motionless, except for his fingers, which slowly twisted and crumbled the unlighted cheroot he held. He was like men I have seen risking their last dollar at Charley's in Hong-Kong. For all the world, he was a man whose life depends upon the chance of a single turn of the wheel.

The other men in the room were watching, too, with the same absorbed look that I had noticed before; but there was too much that I did not understand, and I did not like it. I felt like an outsider deliberately ignored. Nervously I leaned forward to take a match from the box on the table, and by bare chance, in doing so, I caught in a mirror screwed to the after bulkhead the reflection of the face of Parker, whom I had almost forgotten.

In an instant I became a sharer in the secret. The man's face was a mask, gray, like the ashes of a dead fire. His jaw hung loose, his eyes stared straight ahead of him as if they were seeing again the scenes that Simpson had described.

I knew now. It was Parker, who worked for a Chinese firm at Swatow! It was *he* whom the Englishmen and the three Chinamen had been watching, not us. *He* was the man about whom Simpson had been telling.

And Simpson knew. He had been telling it for a purpose. What purpose?

The pity and the tragedy of it, when I saw Parker's face, nearly overcame me; but the thing was so sudden, and after all, so hard to realize, that I had formed no plan when Simpson began to speak again. He took up the story where he had left it, the steadiness of his voice belying the fire in his eyes, which were fixed upon the back of Parker's chair.

"During all this time I have been telling about"—his tone was a little lower and somehow a little less *practised* as he went on—"I did not know the woman at all. My acquaintance with her came at the time when her child was born—her husband's son."

I did not want to see Parker's face, yet for the life of me I could not resist edging forward to where I could catch it in the

mirror. Human curiosity as to the misfortunes of others is a strange thing.

"I did not learn the story all at once," Simpson was saying. "As a physician, I first became interested in the case, which was somewhat unusual, and then in the patient's personality for its own sake. After she left the hospital I kept track of her, and took pains to learn how she and the baby were getting on. She was not strong, you see, and had no resources except her earnings. She really was not able to go about her usual duties at her employer's office; but although he offered leave of absence with pay, she would not accept it, and kept on with her work.

"When the boy was a year-old, she was back in the hospital for an operation. After that, for a time, she was better, and even, I think, happy, because she had her child. She made every effort to learn of her husband's whereabouts, but with the exception of an indirect report of his being seen in Shanghai nearly two years after he disappeared, she could get no trace of him.

"So she went on, sometimes out of health and obliged to give up work, at other times in better health and able to earn a living. But she was very proud. She would accept nothing, even in times when I am sure she did not have enough to eat, or enough to wear, or enough fuel to keep her warm. She said she would rather die and take her boy with her than live upon charity. That was the spirit of her.

"When the boy was about four, she brought him to me one day, ill. It was typhoid, and was already showing signs of going badly. I tried—hard—to save the little fellow, for he was a bright little chap; but his lungs complicated the case, and—he died one night, with his mother holding him in her arms."

Simpson paused, staring at the chair that hid Parker.

"Then she went to pieces herself," he went on slowly and intensely. "In a month she was in the hospital again. I did my best for her, but—she lingered—"

I saw Parker's head suddenly rise, and the next instant he shot out of his chair as if a catapult had suddenly been sprung under him. His face was still the color of

dead ashes, and he trembled and jerked like an epileptic.

"Stop! Stop it!" he shouted at us. "I'm the man! I'm Frank Harper, the poltroon, the coward, you've been telling about! Do you think I'm not punished? Do you think I haven't lived in hell these five years, that you have to come to send me there? Oh—I'm going. I won't find her, but I'll be out of the same world with you, you devil—for a little while!"

As he sprang through the smoke-room door, I could see the three chimneylike signal-towers on the high point of Woo-seu-shan, and I knew that we were coming to Amoy. When Parker, or Harper, disappeared, I followed on deck, leaving Simpson sitting where he was, for he made no sign of moving. The two Englishmen sprang after me, and we three were in time to catch the sound of a splash somewhere astern.

"Man overboard!" sang out one of the Britishers.

"No good," said the other. "We're between the island and the Chaw-chat. Chow-chow water, you know. They can't get him out of that."

And they could not.

I did not go back to Simpson in the smoke-room, but we sat down outside. Presently he came to me. His manner was effusive, like that of a man who has just played for a big stake—and won.

"It was a rather tragic ending," he observed as he sat down and prepared to light a fresh cheroot. "I had hardly counted on it in that way."

"Counted on it?" I inquired, turning on him, for there was something a little too cold-blooded in his tone to suit me just then.

"Yes," he answered. "I could not know how he would take it. I've figured out so many ways, but never exactly this one. You see, I wanted to find him. I've been out here six months now, and I've told that story within the hearing of about every man who could possibly be Harper all the way from Batavia. When I began this time, I did not know it was he. The way the Englishmen and the Chinese watched him gave me the clue. Now I'm going home. Mrs. Harper will—"

"Mrs. Harper!" I shouted. "Do you mean that this man's wife is not dead?"

"Certainly," replied Simpson in an injured tone. "I did not say, or even intimate, that she was dead, did I? She made a perfectly good recovery, though it was rather a problem at first. Mrs. Harper has religious scruples against divorce, so I came out here to learn whether he was still alive. She will be shocked, of course, at hearing that he is not, but," he concluded complacently, "I think I shall be able to console her!"

